The Graduate Review

Volume 2 Article 10

2017

"The Only Reason I Read" and Other Apologies: A Roadmap for Increased Pleasure Reading in the High School

Anne Smith
Bridgewater State University

"The Only Reason I Read" and Other Apologies: A Roadmap for Increased Pleasure Reading in High School

ANNE SMITH

Lettered societies have long debated the act of reading: the nature of it, the value of it, even the dangers of it. The education community also debates the methods and rationale for teaching reading; lately, this discourse has focused on the reading habits of students—what proper reading habits should look like, as well as how teachers and administrators can develop those habits in their pupils. Those of us who are educators already know that we should be concerned about our students' reading habits. A 2007 publication by the National Endowment for the Arts, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, comments, "all progress appears to halt as children enter their teenage years. There is a general decline in reading among teenage and adult Americans" (5). I, too, witness a waning trend of readership in my students' attitudes toward the task. For most of them (freshmen attending St. John Paul II High School, a private Catholic school in Hyannis, Massachusetts), reading habits largely diminished upon entrance to their respective middle schools. A minority that took pleasure from reading continued to maintain their habits independent of their reading instruction, but for the majority, the shift from elementary to secondary education was a leading factor in the decline of their reading habits. The state of affairs that the National Endowment for the Arts addresses, and which I see reflected in my current body of students, is often portrayed as a crisis. However, while I agree that we educators should be concerned about the reading lives of our students, I do not believe that students' reading lives are in danger of vanishing. They are simply adapting to a new reading environment that, for many educators, is a terra incognita.

Laurel Tarulli, who approaches the analysis of reading habits from the discipline of library and information studies, describes this new terrain of reading (296). She cautions us that the vast reports quantifying students' reading lives may have failed because they are too prescriptive about what constitutes the act of reading. She wonders if video gamers, audiobook listeners, and magazine skimmers are classified as readers, and suggests that they are, because "to read… provides us with knowledge or the ability to interact with the tangible or intangible and to interpret our experiences into meaning" (297). Any text, not just a book, will serve us in that regard and, indeed, while 21st-century readers might not be reading as many books, we are also reading in new and diverse media. For this reason, Tarulli

has convinced me that "we can start to make an argument that readers can no longer be identified solely as those who read fiction and nonfiction books, but need to include those who read magazines, websites, blogs, and video games" (298). A revised definition might go so far as to include content shared on social media platforms. Of course, we teach students that reading involves books, so some students are likely engaging in high levels of reading that go underreported in studies, as they would not consider quantifying their social media usage. Educators' attitudes that there is both right and wrong reading material contribute needlessly to the decline that so much scholarship details.

Arguments by teacher-educators, such as Penny Kittle, Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and Michael W. Smith, are gaining momentum as school administrators evaluate their pupils' literacy skills and recognize a need to better engage adolescents in their reading assignments. Kittle, a master teacher at Kennett High School in North Conway, New Hampshire, argues that assigning challenging reading is not a guaranteed method for developing literacy, but encouraging pleasure reading is. "A book isn't rigorous if students aren't reading it… We start with an entry to a reading life and engagement with whole books, even if we feel they are less worthy than the classics" (xvi). Pleasure reading is necessary for reinvigorating students' dormant interest in reading; once students read, they can put their reading to work. I critique that Kittle does not go far enough; students can enter a reading life by engaging with texts derived from the digital world. Wilhelm's and Smith's research about adolescents' pleasure reading suggests that the books students select for their independent reading are even more consequential than simply kick-starting their reading lives; they directly lead to the practice of the very literacy skills that educators are concerned are being lost (7). Wilhelm's and Smith's findings suggest "that the young people… were remarkably articulate about the benefits they received and the pleasures they experienced from their reading, often of books dismissed by some as 'tripe,' 'junk,' 'pulp,' 'pap,' or 'trash'" (9). Similar to Kittle's philosophy, Wilhelm and Smith suggest allowing students to select their own titles for independent reading, but again they exclude digital reading materials. With so many speaking about the benefits of encouraging students' pleasure reading habits, the debate is not whether schools should incorporate pleasure reading into instruction, but how (and even what to include).

By now, the education community has proposed, studied, critiqued, and defended diverse instructional methods for changing students' reading habits. Programs have appeared in such forms and under such names as Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), independent reading, literature circles, and even the descriptive phrase, "free voluntary reading." For the scope of this paper, I will focus on SSR, which Stephen Krashen defines as "time… set aside for recreational reading; students read whatever they like (within reason), and are not tested on what they read" (1). Conceding the strengths of this program, which are well documented, I explore the potential obstacles to its implementation. I argue that, rather than subscribe to SSR based on its popular results, schools

(or at the very least, teachers) must engage in a reflective process to find the best solution for their students' reading lives, which likely involves creative thinking and cobbling together different pieces from multiple instructional approaches. But first, let us examine the reading lives of today's teenagers.

Adolescent Reading Habits in the Digital Age

If educators weren't learning about their students' reading lives and experimenting with instruction to encourage more students to become involved in reading, the statistics analyzing the reading habits of the adolescent would be more disheartening than they already are. The National Endowment for the Arts estimates "nearly half of all Americans ages 18 to 24 read no books for pleasure" and "the percentage of 17-year-olds who read nothing at all for pleasure has doubled over a 20-year period" (7). Educators may also consider the length of time that adolescents engage in acts of reading: "15- to 24-year-olds spend only 7–10 minutes per day on voluntary reading—about 60% less time than the average American" (9). Despite attempts to blame the lack of pleasure reading on the increase of difficult, assigned texts and other challenging course loads that occur in high school, the National Endowment for the Arts found by comparing data from 1984, 1999, and 2004 that "in 17-year-olds—the group whose voluntary reading rates fared the worst—the percentage of students at all five levels of compulsory reading has remained largely constant for the three test periods" (30). Students did not read for pleasure less frequently because they had too much homework or too many extra-curricular activities; instead, the Endowment noticed an increase in Internet access, which likely indicates competition for how adolescents spend their free time (10). The premise the Endowment assumes is that Internet users do not engage in reading while using the Internet. As Tarulli has already questioned in her column, "Pleasure Reading: Exploring a New Definition," the act of reading in the 21st century may very well include the extensive skimming of articles that engages adolescents when they are online, particularly on social media platforms (298).

Whether students' reading habits are diminishing or simply shifting, the trends are certainly similar across the pond. Clark and Rumbold produced a report for the United Kingdom's National Literacy Trust wherein they conducted an analysis of the UK's adolescents' reading lives (5-9). Like the National Endowment for the Arts, Clark and Rumbold observed competition between pleasure reading and other pursuits:

> A survey of school children for World Book Day in 2002 found that 15 to 16 year old boys spent 2.3 hours a week reading for pleasure, compared to 9 hours a week playing computer games or 11 hours watching television. Girls spent considerably more time reading, namely 4.5 hours a week. (9)

The readers themselves recognized this competition for their attention, as another study that Clark and Rumbold cited indicates that a third of the surveyed adolescents "agreed with the statement that they have better things to do than read books" (9). Despite the competition for pleasure reading, Clark and Rumbold

reported that "a survey for the Reading Champions initiative (Clark, Torsi and Strong, 2005) in Spring 2005 found that the majority of pupils (61%) enjoyed reading quite a lot or very much" (10). Put in conversation, these statistics underline Kittle's argument and central belief that "teenagers want to read—if we let them" (Kittle 1). Our job as educators is to help students find the time for pleasure reading. Since we cannot accomplish this by simply reducing or abolishing homework, we must make pleasure reading a component of our instruction.

Since beginning to teach at St. John Paul II High School, I have asked my students in both freshmen and junior year English a series of questions about their reading lives as well as their attitudes and beliefs about reading. Students have free choice regarding which questions they answer and which they combine into a two-page narrative, their Autobiography as a Reader. Of the students who complete this assignment, the vast majority are upper-middle and upper class whites. The other demographic represented in my classes is international students from Beijing as well as Guangdong Province, China. This past year, approximately 98 percent of my students completed the assignment, which I will now review in part.

Students typically identified themselves as readers or nonreaders in the beginning of their autobiography. Most students who described when they learned to read emphasized the involvement of their parents in the process; others emphasized the role of their parents as models for reading when they were small children. In the majority of autobiographies, students who discussed their parents in their early reading lives developed positive associations with reading. One student commented, "My mom, dad, or even babysitter would read to me before I went to sleep. It was the best time ever." For another student, reading together as a family before bed was what made reading pleasurable. Nearly all students were nostalgic about their childhood reading experiences, particularly the picture books they remembered.

Almost universally, students who self-identified as nonreaders mentioned fourth grade as when they lost interest in reading. Students usually attributed their disinterest to "boring" books. As students shifted to discussing their current reading habits, even students who identified themselves as readers said they rarely were reading for pleasure. The reasons students cited emphasized a lack of time for pleasure reading or competition from other past-times. One student wrote, "I have to read all the time in school so it is not fun to read on my own and I am already spending most of my day at school reading and at home reading books to study." For this student, pleasure reading was an additional burden. Another student explained, "I like to read in class because it's better than hearing a lecture or doing a worksheet, but in my free time I still don't think of reading as a fun activity. I think this is because I have less free time as I get older." This student went on to explain that free time was more useful for socializing with friends or playing video games. Another student thought that technology was the distraction from pleasure reading: "I have stopped reading for pleasure now because, I just don't find reading interesting now when

there are resources like television or YouTube to look something up." Finally, another student felt that participating in an extra-curricular activity mutually excluded pleasure reading, reflecting, "I read mostly in school now because I love sports now and I don't like reading. Reading now is just a challenge, it's a force." For this student, being a football player meant that there wasn't any time or reason for pleasure reading.

Interestingly, a selection of students who self-identified as nonreaders, and who also acknowledged the importance of reading, said that they would like to become readers again. One student in particular was not hopeful that the reading habits formed at the end of middle school would change, writing: "as I enter high school I'm not the biggest fan of reading anymore and I think it's because I've read just about all of Rick Riordan's books. I hope he makes a new series for me to start soon because I want to enjoy reading again." This student, along with some others, felt that they could not continue to engage in pleasure reading because they did not know what to read next. Teachers must develop the ability to recommend titles to their students, as all that it might take for a nonreader to begin reading for pleasure again is the right book or author.

The Efficacy of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)

One program that creates time for students' pleasure reading is Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). Normally, SSR is a school-wide initiative, as both Kittle (141-3) and Fisher (138) describe. School-wide initiatives involve administration primarily because school schedules have to be adjusted to create a daily period for reading, often 20 minutes long. Administration also has to enforce that all members, even staff or maintenance workers, read during the SSR period. Finally, school-wide initiatives, at least as described by Kittle and Fisher, require direct administrator participation, not just monitoring. In Kennett High School's SSR program, even Kittle's principal, Neal, leads a group of students: "We had a crew… who had been kicked out of reading break for noncompliance… Neal invited these eight boys to his office, and reading break took on new importance" (Kittle 145). Under the principal's mentorship, these students slowly became readers. As for the SSR program at Hoover High School, Fisher's urban school, administrators became more involved in the program after a student observed that some teachers were not holding students accountable to the 20 minutes of reading, subsequently requiring teachers to form a review committee. After evaluating the program, "the SSR committee requested that administrators regularly visit classrooms to read" (Fisher 147). These visits transpired at random, keeping the faculty on their toes and the program honest.

When SSR works, it truly benefits students. Stephen Krashen observes that "SSR readers report that they read more at the end of the SSR program than at the beginning" and "SSR readers report reading more even years after the program has ended" (1). But, with any program there are obstacles to its implementation. Challenges that Kittle described in her school included providing reading material, handling noncompliance, encouraging students to read more complex material, and holding faculty and staff accountable (Kittle 143-

6). After her early attempts to create a classroom SSR period, English teacher Valarie Lee reflected, "it was painfully evident that starting an SSR program was not as easy as making time and providing a bookshelf of books or students to read" (211). In each of the SSR programs, student buy-in necessitated teacher buy-in, and for the school-wide programs, teacher buy-in necessitated administrator buy-in (and Fisher's article suggests that even administrator buy-in had to be checked by committee buy-in). It is easy to ask why, when many data evidence the academic gains produced by SSR, these levels of buy-in fail to occur. It is more difficult to answer, because skilled SSR practitioners tend to dismiss prospective answers based on the success of their own programs. Objections that are related to school scheduling or budgets are the most difficult to dismiss, but when the administrators and faculty of both Kittle's suburban school and Fisher's urban school recognized the importance of SSR and truly valued the program, these schools managed to overcome the challenges (146-8; 149).

When I think about how St. John Paul II High School might implement an SSR program, I cringe at the idea of scheduling; our school has already undergone a major scheduling change in the past three years and a second change would communicate indecisiveness and weakness to the Advisory Board. However, the current schedule does include a 24-minute period opposite the lunch period that could be replaced with SSR, while not on a daily basis, at least once in a seven-day rotation. The challenge would be deciding the day for SSR, as many faculty members claim the same timeslot for extra help, extra-curricular activities, and additional instructional time (for Advanced Placement courses and lab sciences). It would be difficult to achieve teacher buy-in when so many teachers will have to give up one of their offerings. Budgetary concerns would also be hard to resolve, although passionate teachers and administrators often find sources of funding or solicit donations for their SSR program. In my own school, the attitude is "Ask and ye shall receive." Lack of reading materials would be an easy challenge for St. John Paul II High School to overcome.

When teachers propose developing a school-wide SSR program, encounter these challenges, and are unable to overcome them, or face a lack of administrator buy-in, the teachers may always consider Lee's method for SSR programming: keep it in the classroom, which for the most part is the teacher's domain (210). (Lee's method would be nearly impossible to implement for teachers who are required to teach from scripts or departmental-approved lesson plans.) When Lee realized that SSR was outside of her school's English curriculum and that her school would not change the schedule for a school-wide program, she decided to build SSR into her own daily instruction (211). The benefit of keeping SSR in the classroom is that the teacher can closely monitor the program and continually modify it, having total freedom to experiment with its procedures until the students embrace SSR.

Recommendations for Any and All Secondary Schools

Where does this analysis leave the English

teacher, like myself, who works in a school where scheduling considerations limit the possibility of creating an authentic school-wide SSR program? In short, the teacher must decide whether it is better to work alone, producing a pleasure reading program within the individual classroom, or open a larger discussion with the department, faculty, and administration. Regardless of avenue, the teacher cannot begin to develop a program until having a deep understanding of the students' reading lives. In order to figure out how to encourage pleasure reading, the teacher must know why students in the local setting are not reading. My argument is that SSR does not work effectively as a one-size-fits-all program, especially because its definition of reading is outdated. Instead, teachers can build successful programs for their students using the core ideas of SSR as well as their own intuition and knowledge of their students' reading lives. For some schools, a school-wide initiative might be the best fit; for other schools, like my own, a classroom-based model might be better.

I have already suggested that the teacher should begin creating a program first by gathering data from their school's student body. I have found that students are brutally honest when writing the Autobiography as a Reader, especially when they see their teacher engage with their responses and exhibit a total lack of judgment. Many a time I have bonded with students over not just books mutually loved, but mutually hated; also, the woes of not being able to read as much as we'd like. For the teacher, these conversations and documents are a data mine. With minimal effort, teachers can identify barriers that are preventing students' pleasure reading as well as develop a list of new titles and authors for the classroom library. From my own research in the autobiographies, I have learned that my students need opportunities to read as well as book suggestions. Already this information has shaped my classroom practice: I devote more instructional time to reading and, perhaps even more importantly, I often discuss my opinions of the books that I am currently reading. I listen more closely for opportunities to suggest titles and authors to students when they talk about their reading in class; recently a student bemoaned the end of the *Percy Jackson* series, and rather than redirect the conversation to the day's learning objective, I mentioned seeing an advertisement for a new book series that critics described as the next *Percy Jackson*. Whether the student reads the books or not, the seed is planted. The situation is even better when I own the book that I am suggesting; students are also surprised that I remembered their interests when I bring the book to class the next day for them to peruse. Sometimes the student leaves the book with me, but sometimes the student takes it, especially when other students express interest in it.

The method I am suggesting depends on the teacher getting to know students as fellow readers, not just people to be taught uniform content in the English curriculum. It requires the skill that Tarulli trains librarians to have: recommending books to patrons (298). Despite being a teacher, my students are my patrons. My practice is to get students to think about their reading habits, point out the variety of reading materials that are available to them, and place reading material in their hands. I hesitate to label my practice as a

"program" because it consists of an offhand, unplanned comment to a student during a tangential conversation here and a coincidental action of book lending there; it is nothing close to the daily 20 minutes of SSR. But, I know how my practice is going to become a program. It will involve more intentional conversations with students about what they read as well as what I read (particularly the texts we find through social media), and it will involve a more intentional effort to suggest reading material for each student. Today a student mentioned that he likes reading *Star Wars* fan theories online. Anecdotally, this happened to be the same student who said reading wasn't interesting because of television and YouTube. In my conversation with the student, I affirmed that fan theories "counted" as legitimate reading by suggesting a new theory about Jar Jar Binks for the student to look up. I also pointed him to another reader (a fellow teacher) who would be willing to discuss the text. In short, today I convinced a non-reader to read for pleasure, as well as introduced him to a larger community that loves the same genre. It was a good day.

Works Cited

Clark, Christina and Kate Rumbold. *Reading for Pleasure: A Research Overview*. *National Literacy Trust*, National Literacy Trust, 2006, http://www.literacytrust.org.uk. *Penny Kittle: Teacher, Author, Advocate*, Penny Kittle, 2016, http://pennykittle.net/uploads/images/PDFs/Reports/Reading_pleasure_2006.pdf.

Fisher, Douglas. "Setting the 'Opportunity to Read' Standard: Resuscitating the SSR Program in an Urban High School." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2004, pp. 138-150. *Education Research Complete*, http://maxwell.bridgew.edu.libserv-prd.bridgew.edu.

Kittle, Penny. *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers*. Heinemann, 2013.

Krashen, Stephen. "81 Generalizations about Free Voluntary Reading." *IATEFL Young Learner and Teenager Special Interest Group Publication*, International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language, 2009. *Penny Kittle: Teacher, Author, Advocate*, Penny Kittle, 2016, http://pennykittle.net/uploads/images/PDFs/Reports/81-Generalizations-about-FVR-2009.pdf.

Lee, Valarie. "Becoming the Reading Mentors our Adolescents Deserve: Developing a Successful Sustained Silent Reading Program." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2011, pp. 209-218. *Education Research Complete*, doi: 10.1002/JAAL.00026.

Office of Research and Analysis. *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*. *National Endowment for the Arts*, edited by Don Ball, National Endowment for the Arts, 2007, http://www.arts.gov. *Penny Kittle: Teacher, Author, Advocate*, Penny Kittle, 2016, http://pennykittle.net/uploads/images/PDFs/Reports/NEAtoReadCopy.pdf.

Tarulli, Laurel. "Pleasure Reading: Exploring a New Definition." *Reference & User Services Quarterly*,

vol. 53, no. 4, 2014, pp. 296-299. *Education Research Complete,* http://maxwell.bridgew.edu.libserv-prd.bridgew.edu.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. et al. *Reading Unbound: Why Kids Need to Read What They Want—and Why We Should Let Them*. Scholastic, 2014.

About the Author

Anne Smith is enrolled in the MA in English program at Bridgewater State University. She currently teaches freshmen and junior English at St. John Paul II High School. Her research project was completed in fall 2016 under the guidance of Dr. Kimberly Chabot Davis.